

Tools and templates



How to deal with difficult employees

Difficult employees are an inevitable part of management. Even with a tried-and-tested hiring process, managers can end up with employees who find it hard to focus or don't get on well with others.

What matters most is how you handle the situation. Here are eight ideas you can use to tackle the issue.

1. Give your employee the chance to talk

When faced with a difficult employee, it's tempting to avoid one-on-one conversations and simply leave them to get on with things. However, you're robbing yourself and your employee of the chance to get to the bottom of any conflict. Taking the time to listen to them and understand their perspective can shine new light on the situation.

2. Work back to the root cause of issues

Try to identify the root cause of problems instead of rushing to offer a fix. An employee's difficult behaviour might stem from a legitimate grievance, like being overlooked for a promotion, the stagnation of their pay or poor training. Listen, encourage honesty and perhaps arrange a meeting on neutral ground like a café.

3. Give specific feedback

No one likes giving tough feedback, but your employee can't improve unless they know exactly what they're doing wrong. Give employees specific information on how they could improve or why it would be beneficial to do a certain task differently. Examples are helpful and try to keep emotions separate, even if tensions are running high.

4. Be consistent with your standards

Check you aren't sending mixed messages. If an employee does something wrong, don't be fine with it some days and annoyed about it on other days. Chances are, if an employee thinks they can get away with something 50 per cent of the time, they'll keep risking it. Think about what your standards are and be consistent.

5. Document your steps

Documentation is crucial when you're dealing with a difficult employee. If the worst comes to the worst and you decide that you want to let the employee go, managers need to have records of the employee's behaviour and the steps they have taken to try and resolve the issue.

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6. Follow up with consequences

Are there consequences to poor behaviour? If you pay lip service to consequences but don't see them through, they won't be effective in deterring behaviour. Be as specific as possible about what will happen if a difficult employee continues on the same path ("if you don't improve your behaviour by X date, you won't be eligible for Y promotion").

7. Be brave if you need to make a hard decision

If nothing else has worked and you've decided you need to let the employee go, be brave – don't put it off or make someone else do it. If you need extra support with the process, reach out to an HR expert.

8. Communicate with the rest of your workforce

Bad news travels fast. If you've made the decision to terminate an employee, it's important to act quickly to stop rumours spreading and alleviate any concerns about increased workloads.

Briefly explain why the employee left and cover practical issues like if you'll be rehiring and how the work will be distributed in the meantime. Give staff space to ask follow-up questions, then arrange a dedicated office hour for people to share their thoughts privately.